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Does The National Rifle Association Affect Federal Elections?

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Executive Summary:

- It seems intuitively obvious that interest group endorsements influence elections, and do so most effectively in districts where the group's membership is greatest. However, scholarly research has been unable to prove whether the intuition is correct.

- This Issue Paper offers an empirical test of interest group influence on election outcomes.

- The Issue Paper examines the impact of the National Rifle Association in U.S. House of Representatives elections. Using data from the 1994 and 1996 elections, the Paper examines to what degree, if any, a NRA endorsement in a race affected the percent of the vote which an endorsed candidate received.

- The estimation formula controls for other variables, such as party voting registration, the district's support of presidential candidates of each party, and campaign spending.

- The Issue Paper uses a similar model to test whether the NRA has greater ability to influence elections in districts where NRA membership is larger.

- The data show that, in general, a NRA endorsement can raise a candidate's share of the vote by approximately 3% per 10,000 NRA members in the district. Thus, in a district with 20,000 NRA members, the NRA endorsement might add 6% to a candidate's share of the vote.

- Challengers benefit more from endorsements than do incumbents. For challengers, there is a potential total gain of 5% on election day for every 10,000 NRA members in the district.

Introduction

Does the NRA have any effect as an organized interest group? The conventional wisdom is that interest group activity has an effect on election outcomes. Academic research has, until now, been unable to demonstrate that conventional wisdom right or wrong.[1] In a multi-year study of the impact of the NRA's endorsement of federal candidates, we have uncovered the first empirical evidence that the NRA's political efforts have direct, detectable political impact in federal elections. In this Issue Paper we describe how our interest in this effect was aroused and what was found.

In a multi-year study of the impact of the NRA's endorsement of federal candidates, we have uncovered the first empirical evidence that the NRA's political efforts have direct, detectable political impact in federal elections.

In 1994, we noticed two things: First, the NRA published its list of federal and state candidates and their ratings on gun rights issues, and indicated in many cases which candidate to support to advance the individual interpretation of the Second Amendment. Second, many of these candidates won; control of Congress switched parties, and then-president Clinton declared that the NRA was the cause of many of his friends' defeat.[2] If ever there were a time to assess scientifically and empirically whether organized interest groups are effective electoral machines, it seemed that this was it.

We assembled into a three-person research team. We were academics at two different state universities. Two of us are members of the NRA and one is not. We included a non-member to ensure that we were not slanting our analysis. We designed an empirical study using statistical modeling techniques to assess the effects of NRA activity on House of Representatives elections in 1994 and 1996. Anecdotal evidence, some already cited, abounded that the NRA's efforts had indeed affected election outcomes in 1994 and we extended the research to the 1996 Congressional elections as well.

The main question investigated was whether and in what ways the NRA was able to influence the outcomes of the House district races in those two years. More specifically we asked two questions:

- to what extent did an NRA endorsement influence the results?

- given an endorsement, did the number of members in a district affect how much endorsement influenced the results?

Why the NRA

Interest Group theory suggests that some groups should be more successful than others. Groups with a single-issue focus, large membership, a good deal of money, and a history of political participation should be more easily able to mobilize and persuade members.[3] The NRA seemed a close fit to the theory. It has long been considered a powerful player in the electoral arena. It is a single-issue group with a large membership distributed across all congressional districts. It has a large annual budget. It is tightly organized with a subdivision—the Institute for Legislative Action (ILA)—dedicated to political activity. Member satisfaction levels were high—at least according to NRA sources. In short, if in theory groups could influence election results, then NRA effects should be evident, particularly in 1994.

Groups with a single-issue focus, large membership, a good deal of money, and a history of political participation should be more easily able to mobilize and persuade members.

Not only was the NRA an especially good group for which to test Interest Group theory, the NRA was highly suited for quantitative examination. The NRA had made candidate ratings for every House of Representative race, and had offered endorsements in a very large number of those races. Significantly, we were able to obtain the number of NRA members in each Congressional District, because the NRA made available to us its proprietary data on district membership. Since member and

sympathizer mobilization is crucial to theories of interest group effectiveness the membership data were especially valuable, indeed crucial, as they were the missing piece in every other study ever done on interest group effects. The data were released on the condition that the district counts would not be published.[4]

With these attributes of the NRA and the unusual data we could see this as a kind of test case. If the NRA had no independent effect then it is unlikely that other interest groups would either. Put the other way, the use of models that included the effects of other political variables means that the NRA's efforts were put to an extremely severe test.

The Modeling Process

In order to evaluate the hypothesis that the NRA had an impact in the 1994 and 1996 House elections, we employ an aggregate model of vote share similar to the model first described by Jacobson; the Jacobsen model is the basis for nearly every study on the impact of money in Congressional elections.[5] What we have done is extend this theory to incorporate the concurrent impact of Interest Group activity. The basic model is as follows:

> **Equation 1.**
> Challenger Share of the Vote = f(Challenger Party, Challenger Party Strength, Challenger Spending, Incumbent Spending, Seat Safety, Presidential Vote Share, NRA Endorsement and membership number variables)

From the basic equation we developed two models for each election, for a total of four analyses. In two of the analyses, the variable being predicted was Challenger share of the vote; the models included all of the basic variables except NRA membership in the district. In the other two analyses, the variable being predicted was Endorsee Share of the vote and NRA membership was included.

The first two analyses ask—over and above the effect of everything except NRA membership—did the NRA endorsement affect the challenger's share of the vote in that year. The second two analyses ask—given an endorsement—did NRA membership numbers in the congressional district affect the endorsee's vote that year. The analysis is complex and so are the results.

Results

Results are shown in Tables 1, 2 and 3. Each Table is divided to show outcomes for the two Congressional elections. Tables 2A and 2B show results of the complete model with NRA endorsement as the interest group variable. Tables 3A and 3B again show the effects of the models for both elections, this time with NRA membership in the Congressional District as the key variable. Table 3b also shows the interaction of District NRA membership and NRA endorsement of the challenger.

In the four modeling exercises there are 18 times where the NRA variable (endorsement or membership) was tested. Of these, 13 indicated an effect: either a gain for the challenger or endorsee or a loss of votes for the opponent. Of the 13, 5 met the customary 95% level of statistical significance and 4 more met a 90% standard. There was a clear difference between the two election years; NRA effects were clearly greater in 1994.

The models, which took into account all the other possible effect variables that were measurable, create strong statistical tests. For example, one of the models in Table 3B testing for the effect of district membership included Endorsee Spending, Non-endorsee Spending, Endorsee Seat Safety, G.H.W. Bush percent of the vote in 1992, whether the endorsee was a challenger or an incumbent, and an interaction term combining the endorsee as challenger and the number of members. The

question then is what effect does membership have over and above all these other factors.

The most prominent effects of membership were in 1994; each increment of 10,000 members in a district was associated with a three percent gain in endorsee vote. Here again, challengers gained more than incumbents from the NRA endorsement. For challengers, each 10,000 members meant a gain of five percent. This is a substantial effect indeed. The margin of victory in many contested races is less than five percent of votes cast.

As is commonly the case when truly systematic analysis is done, these results are complex and not all readily understood. Does the NRA activity affect election results? Yes, but not always to the same extent and not for all candidates. Challengers, Republicans, and 1994 stand out as showing greater effects. We all know there are issue differences in our elected officials: Southern Democrats are often different from the Massachusetts Democrats on many issues, including taxation and gun control. Northeastern Republicans do not necessarily resemble their Midwestern party brethren on these issues either. The strength of our analysis is in accounting for the variation within and across the parties in whether NRA endorsements were made, and also accounting for the local strength of NRA membership to influence elections.

Differences due to party and election could not be studied directly in this Issue Paper, but we can speculate. Why 1994 so much more than 1996? Perhaps there are different rates of turnout for NRA members, though earlier studies have suggested that, contrary to popular belief, the average NRA member is more affluent, and more likely to vote than is the norm in the population.[6] Perhaps in the mid-term year of 1994 with lower overall turnout NRA members and sympathizers were a larger share of the electorate. Why Republican candidates in 1994? It was a big Republican year generally. It

seemed that the NRA could amplify but not mitigate the party trend. Our study was at the aggregate level; we studied the behavior of congressional district electorates—not individual voters. We do not know, for example, whether Democrat NRA members or otherwise pro-gun voters were cross-pressured in their voting choices and thus less likely to vote for an endorsee or vote at all.

Conclusions

Most research on the electoral impact of organized interest groups reports that groups have a negligible impact. Our study of the effects of the NRA in congressional elections of 1994 and 1996 indicates otherwise. The pattern of endorsements and the reaction by the membership led to real, substantive electoral results. Though Interest Group effects have been hypothesized for more than 50 years, this Issue Paper demonstrates the effect through empirical research.

The magnitude of these effects cannot be ignored. Forty-six races in 1994 and 38 races in 1996 were decided by four points or less, meaning the NRA can potentially swing an election with its endorsement and membership numbers given the right electoral context.

So, does the NRA have any political impact? The answer is yes. This interest group gathers information on gun control and other issues important to the members, disseminates the information to the membership, represents its members to elected officials, reports to the membership the behaviors of elected officials, and helps shape public opinion on some issues. Put another way, the NRA is like a political party, but one that cuts across the current two-party alignment.

Tables

Table 1a
Winners in 1994 Contested House races by incumbency, party, and NRA endorsement

	Endorsed & won	Endorsed & lost	Not endorsed & won	Not endorsed & lost
Dem. Challenger	0	2	0	120
Rep. Challenger	24	42	10	132
Dem. Incumbent	39	5	135	29
Rep Incumbent	88	0	34	0

Table 1b
Winners in 1996 Contested House races by incumbency, party, and NRA endorsement

	Endorsed & won	Endorsed & lost	Not endorsed & won	Not endorsed & lost
Dem. Challenger	0	3	12	187
Rep. Challenger	0	36	2	124
Dem. Incumbent	36	1	124	1
Rep. Incumbent	149	10	41	2

Table 2a
Challenger Share of the Vote in 1994 contested House races by NRA endorsement, candidate spending, challenger party, challenger party strength, presidential vote, and seat safety.

	All Races	Challenger is a Democrat	Challenger is a Republican
Constant	.108 (.033)	.208 (.062)**	.071 (.038)
Log Ch. Spending	.023 (.002)***	.021 (.003)***	.023(.003)***
Log In. Spending	.003 (.005)	.010 (.008)	-.004 (.007)
Challenger Party	-.051 (.017)**	--------	--------
Chall. Party Strength	.247 (.042)***	.043 (.060)	.375 (.056)***
Seat Safety	.011 (.004)**	.028 (.006)***	.004 (.007)
Republican Chall.* Bush percent 1992	.282 (.035)***	--------	--------
Bush percent 1992	---------	-.114 (.059)	.252 (.040)***
NRA Endorsed Chall.	.018 (.008)*	-.015 (.029)	.020 (.009)*
NRA End. Incumbent	-.017 (.007)*	-.015 (.009)	-.016 (.010)
N=	315	119	196
R2=	.80	.68	.80
Adj. R2	.79	.66	.79

Note: Dependent variable is challenger share of the vote. Table entries are OLS regression coefficients with T-values in parentheses. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001.

Table 2b
Challenger Share of the Vote in 1996 contested House races by NRA endorsement, candidate spending, challenger party, challenger party strength, presidential vote, and seat safety.

	All Races	**Challenger is a Republican**	**Challenger is a Democrat**
Constant	.185(.030)***	.340 (.048)***	.002 (.034)
Log Ch. Spending	.025 (.002)***	.028 (.003)***	.022 (.003)***
Log In. Spending	-.006 (.005)	-.013 (.007)	.001 (.006)
Challenger Party	-.151 (.015)***	--------	--------
Chal. Party Strength	.308 (.037)***	.288 (.050)***	.283 (.053)***
Seat Safety	.015 (.004)**	.007 (.005)	.016 (.006)*
Republican Chall.* Dole percent 1996	.257 (.035)***	--------	--------
Dole percent 1996	---------	-.264 (.051)***	.288 (.045)***
NRA Endorsed Chall.	-.001 (.009)	-.007 (.026)	-.000 (.010)
NRA Endorsed Inc.	-.011 (.006)	.012 (.009)	-.016 (.010)
N=	339	183	156
R2=	.83	.76	.87
Adj. R2	.82	.75	.86

Note: Dependent variable is challenger share of the vote. Table entries are OLS regression coefficients with T-values in parentheses. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001.

Table 3a
Endorsee Share of the Vote in 1994 contested House races by NRA membership, endorsee spending, non-endorsee spending, endorsee party, endorsee party strength, incumbency/challenger status, presidential vote, and seat safety.

	Model A	**Model B**
Constant	.384 (.037)***	.410 (.039)***
Log Endorsee Spending	.016 (.005)**	.016 (.004)**
Log Non-End. Spending	-.025 (.003)***	-.025 (.003)***
Endorsee Party	.080 (.008)***	.080 (.008)***
Endorsee Party Strength	.141 (.050)**	.136 (.050)**
Endorsee Seat Safety	.027 (.004)***	.026 (.004)***
Bush percent 1992	.098 (.042)*	.087 (.042)*
Endorsee is Challenger	-.087 (.011)***	-.124 (.022)***
Endorsee Challenger * Number of NRA members	-----------	.005 (.002)*
Number of NRA members	.003 (.001)**	.002 (.001)

	Model A	Model B
N=	192	192
R2=	.89	.89
Adj. R2	.89	.89

Note: Dependent variable is endorsee share of the vote. Table entries are OLS regression coefficients with T-values in parentheses. Model A includes Number of NRA Members but not the interaction of Endorsee Challenger/Number of Members. Model B contains both Number of Members and the Endorsee Challenger/Number of Members interaction. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 3b
Endorsee Share of the Vote in 1996 contested House races by NRA membership, endorsee spending, non-endorsee spending, endorsee party, endorsee party strength, incumbency/challenger status, presidential vote, and seat safety.

	Model A	Model B
Constant	.381 (.049)***	.387 (.050)***
Log Endorsee Spending	.015 (.006)**	.015 (.006)*
Log Non-End. Spending	-.026 (.003)***	-.026 (.003)***
Endorsee Party	-.035 (.009)**	-.035 (.009)**
Endorsee Party Strength	.297 (.052)***	.297 (.052)***
Endorsee Seat Safety	.019 (.005)**	.019 (.005)**
Dole Percent 1996	.114 (.046)*	.112 (.045)*
Endorsee is Challenger	-.075 (.014)***	-.089 (.028)**
Endorsee Challenger * Number of NRA Members	-----------	.002 (.004)
Number of NRA Members	.002 (.001)	.001 (.001)
N=	216	216
R2=	.86	.86
Adj. R2	.85	.85

Note: Dependent variable is endorsee share of the vote. Table entries are OLS regression coefficients with T-values in parentheses. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001.

Endnotes

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A more lengthy discussion and statistical analyses are in Christopher Kenney, Michael McBurnett and David Bordua, "The Impact of Political Interests in the 1994 and 1996 Congressional Elections: The Role of the National Rifle Association," *British Journal of Political Science,* 34 (2004): 331-44. The research would not have been possible without the cooperation of Tanya Metaksa, former Director of the NRA's Institute for Legislative Action, and Paul Blackman then research coordinator for the NRA-ILA . Ms. Metaksa made available the data on ratings, endorsements and membership used in the analyses. Membership numbers are proprietary and were made available on condition that they be kept confidential. The authors accept responsibility for interpretations made with these data.

[1] Edward Tufte, "Determinants of the Outcomes of Midterm Congressional Elections," *American Political Science Review*, 69 (1975): 812-26; Gary C. Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); James Campbell, *The Presidential Pulse of Congressional Elections* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993); Jonathon S. Krasno, *Challengers, Competition and Reelection* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994).

[2] Evelyn Theiss, "Clinton Blames Losses on NRA," (Cleveland) *Plain-Dealer*, Jan. 14, 1995, p. A1 ("The NRA is the reason the Republicans control the house").

[3] Steven J. Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation and Democracy in America* (New York, Macmillan, 1993), p. 25.

[4] The NRA also made available its complete set of candidate ratings and endorsements. This information was not private, since, obviously, it has been disseminated to NRA members.

[5] Jacobsen, op cit.

[6] Edward F. Leddy, *Magnum Force Lobby* (New York, University Press of America, 1987), pp. 235ff.